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During December, new record seizures were made in different regions. Malta reported its largest cocaine seizure to date, while Brazil reported a record seizure for the State of Rio de Janeiro of 2.5 tons of cocaine in Caxias and an impressive 3 tons of cocaine in the Port of Santos.

Meanwhile, a number of articles were written on trends and developments characterizing cocaine trafficking and organized crime in 2020 as well as on foreseen risks for 2021 as experts and analysts in the field reflected on the past year.

Happy New Year 2021!

As always, you can reach out to us via Twitter, on our website or via email.

Readers should note that analysis and seizures disseminated in this document are obtained from open sources. It is recommended that all content be verified by independent sources for further use or reference.

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Brazilian Federal Police seizes 2.5 tons of cocaine in Caxias (State of Rio de Janeiro)

2 December 2020 – G1 (Article in Portuguese)

The Brazilian Federal Police (BFP) announced that they made the largest cocaine seizure in the history of Rio de Janeiro after they found around 2.5 tons of cocaine in a warehouse in the city of Duque de Caxias, located on Guanabara Bay. Two individuals have been arrested in relation to the case.

This seizure was facilitated thanks to intelligence and surveillance actions, which guided the Drug Enforcement Administration (DRE/RJ) to the warehouse and prompted agents to intervene following a suspicious movement of vehicles. According to police, security around the warehouse was being handled by an off-duty military policeman. He has been arrested. Two unregistered weapons, as well as a radio communicator, were also seized.

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UK Border Force finds over a ton of cocaine in banana pulp shipment at London Gateway port

6 December 2020 – Independent

A routine inspection has led UK Border Force officers to seize 1,060 kg of cocaine in a shipment of banana pulp at the port of London Gateway. The commercial vessel was arriving from Colombia and bound for the Netherlands. Although the drugs were not intended for the UK consumer market, the National Crime Agency has stated that *“it is likely that at least a proportion would have ended up being sold on our streets”*.

UK Border Force has carried out a number of anti-drug operations since the outbreak of COVID-19. According to the Independent, organized crime groups have been trafficking cocaine in larger consignments due to ongoing aviation and shipping restrictions. This incident follows a seizure of a similar quantity - 1155 kg - at London Gateway Port in September 2020.

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More than 2.5 tons of cocaine seized in Costa Rica

6 December 2020 – RTL (Article in French)

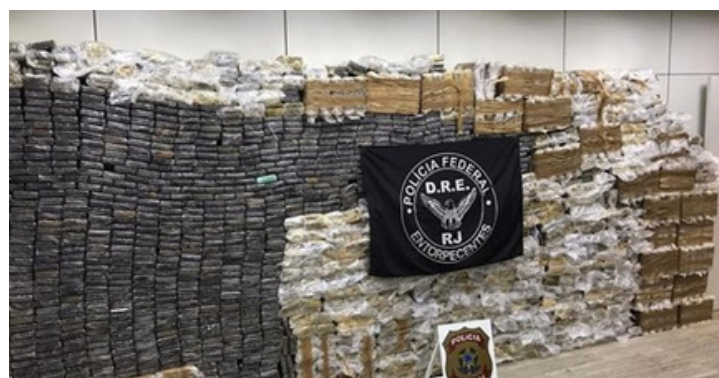
Authorities in Costa Rica seized more than 2.5 tons of cocaine aboard a dinghy off the coast of the tourist beach of Cahuita. Law enforcement tracked down the dinghy after it was detected by police aircraft.

The Ministry of Public Security has since announced that the six men aboard, allegedly aware of the drugs and responsible for transporting them, have been arrested.

According to the Department of Public Safety, the occupants abandoned the boat on a nearby beach and attempted to flee on foot, only to be apprehended shortly thereafter.

Frequent cocaine seizures suggest Costa Rica continues to be used as a key transit point for cocaine produced in South America and destined for consumer markets in the United States and Europe.

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Malta records the largest cocaine seizure in history

10 December 2020 – 20 Minutes (Article in French)

Law enforcement in Malta seized 612 kg of cocaine, marking the largest cocaine seizure in the country's history. Drugs were concealed in 510 parcels of cooking oil in a shipment originating from Ecuador and transiting through Colombia before being intercepted in Malta on its way to Libya.

Customs officials stated that discrepancies revealed in radiographs of the cargo had prompted officials to conduct a physical inspection of the container ship. They have underscored the unprecedented nature of this seizure. In comparison, a total of 750 kg of cocaine was seized in 16 different container ships during the whole of 2019 in Malta.

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1,600 kg of cocaine hidden in a container ship seized in the Spanish port of Algeciras

11 December 2020 – Estrecho Digital (Article in Spanish)

Officials from the Spanish Customs Surveillance Service, in a joint operation with the UK National Crime Agency, seized 1,600 kg of cocaine, at the port of Algeciras hidden in a container loaded with bananas. This seizure follows an operation launched at the end of November 2020 after an exchange of information and intelligence between the two law enforcement agencies had revealed criminal actors intended to smuggle a significant amount of cocaine in a container ship bound for Spain. Despite a lack of detailed information, law enforcement officials knew the cocaine to be concealed in a cargo of bananas arriving from the Colombian city of Medellin. Follow-up analysis work enabled Customs to identify the container ship and discover the illicit drugs. Since the 1980s, Medellin has played a critical role along the cocaine supply chain. Although the Medellin Cartel was disbanded in the mid-1990s, a number of smaller organized crime groups have risen in turn, filling the power vacuum left by Escobar, compartmentalizing responsibilities along the supply chain and exploiting globalization to reach consumer markets worldwide.

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Brazilian Federal Revenue discovers nearly 3 tons of cocaine in the Port of Santos

22 December 2020 – G1 (Article in Portuguese)

The Federal Revenue in Brazil has broken another record with the seizure of 2,932 kg of cocaine during a routine check at the port of Santos, located along the coast of the State of São Paulo. Drugs were discovered concealed in a shipment of aluminum coils, which was heading for the Dutch Port of Rotterdam.

According to reporting by G1 Global, this marks the highest seizure recorded by the Federal Revenue Service at the Port of Santos, surpassing the previous record seizure of 1,1776 kg dating back to March 2019. At the time, drugs had been found in a cargo of fresh lemons stored in cardboard boxes.

In 2020, the Federal Revenue Service carried out some 49 seizures at the port of Santos amounting to some 20.5 tons of cocaine – most of which was bound for the European consumer market.

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The use of narco-submarines may rise in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic

2 December 2020 – Insight Crime

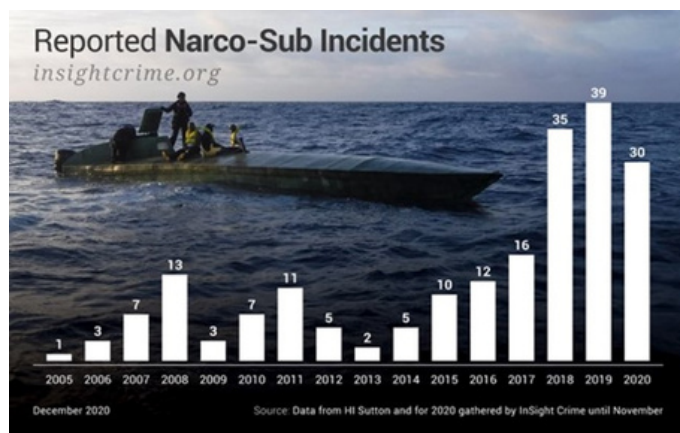
The Attorney General's Office of Colombia, the Colombian Navy and the US Drug Enforcement Administration reported the arrest of 11 alleged members of an organization dedicated to manufacturing and adapting vessels, including submarines, to smuggle cocaine across maritime and fluvial borders. According to reporting by Insight Crime, their business and operations in rural areas along the Currupí River were protected by the National Liberation Army (ELN). This enabled the organization to coordinate logistics with various groups to ship drugs abroad, retrieve building materials and construct the vessels.

It appears that the use of submarines – specifically semi-submersibles – to smuggle drugs across borders has become commonplace for many organized crime groups based in Latin America. In 2019, at least 23 were seized in Colombia alone, another 27 were intercepted between January and August 2020 along its Pacific coast and nearby international waters, and many more are believed to travel undetected.

Although the global number of seizures of narco-submarines has decreased in 2020, it is believed the decline is less to do with a drop in traffic, and more with a re-prioritization of law enforcement resources due to COVID-19 restrictions. In fact, in a separate article published on 31 December 2020, Insight Crime has stated it expects organized crime groups to increasingly use submarines, specifically semi-submersibles, to smuggle drugs across maritime borders.

These vessels, also known as “Low-Profile-Vessels” have the added benefit of largely avoiding mobility restrictions imposed as a result of COVID-19. The discovery of a narco-submarine off the coast of Spain in December 2019 has further indicated such vessels now have the capacity to successfully make transatlantic crossings.

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Brazilian Federal Police dismantles organized crime group responsible for drug trafficking between Bolivia and Brazil

2 December 2020 – G1 (Article in Portuguese)

The Federal Police launched an operation dubbed “Areia Branca” in an effort to disband an organized crime group involved in international drug trafficking and money laundering.

Five preventive arrest warrants and 19 search and seizure warrants in the cities of Corumbá (located along the border with Bolivia), Campo Grande and Espiritu Santo were issued and efforts continue to confiscate more than 11 million BRL in proceeds of crimes that accrued by the group. These law enforcement actions were triggered in 2018 after the activities of a major Brazilian drug lord were detected, leading to his arrest. At that time, he was coordinating the shipment of some three tons of cocaine per month into Brazilian territory from the Bolivian region of Chapare. Drugs were smuggled into Brazil mainly via light aircraft and then transported to the country's major ports via trucks, where they were loaded into container ships bound for Europe.

A number of recent seizures, including 529 kg of cocaine in Viana in November 2017, and 458 kg of cocaine in Carauri in 2018, have been linked to this organized crime group. The name “Areia Branca” refers to a sand mill in Coroumbá owned by the organized crime group, which served as a front, among other companies, to launder assets obtained from international drug trafficking.

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Violence ongoing as organized crime groups compete over control of trafficking routes in Colombia's Northwest Chocó department

10 December 2020 – Insight Crime

The kidnapping and subsequent murder of an indigenous leader, by the Urabeños, in the municipality of Bahía Solano, located in the northern department of Chocó, has prompted some 900 members of the indigenous community to leave their homes, fearing further violence, and led to the deployment of security forces across the area. This incident is the latest casualty of ongoing competition between organized crime groups in Colombia to control the key choke points along the cocaine supply chain in the northwest of the country. Bahía Solano remains a geo-strategic point of transit for arms trafficking, migrant smuggling and cocaine produced in Colombia and set for Panama or Central America via clandestine roads or speed boats. Two groups, the Urabeños and the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN), are competing over control of its territory. Their confrontations are part of an ongoing conflict to control the country's northern department of Chocó which started in 2016 with the departure of the 57th Front of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC). Although confrontations between the two criminal groups tend to occur in rural areas, further incidents of violence have been reported in the urban area of Bahía Solano. It is believed that the ELN has subcontracted the organized crime group, Chacales, since the start of 2020 to fight the Urabeños. According to Insight Crime, the frequency and quantity of drugs being shipped out of Bahía Solano are so high that they have contributed to the emergence of a new trade, dubbed "pesca blanca" (white fishing), which involves recovering the cocaine lost at sea.

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The globalization and fragmentation of the cocaine supply chain threatens rule of law and institutional integrity in European countries

13 December 2020 – El País (Article in Spanish)

Growing availability of cocaine in Europe poses ongoing serious security threats to the continent. Its ports, and port cities, have notably experienced increased levels of violence and corruption with reports of homicides, shootings, attacks, kidnappings, the use of homemade grenade explosions as rival organized crime groups compete over the control of entry and exit points. In addition, illicit activities are believed to be responsible for an increase in the corruption of criminal justice practitioners in Europe, raising concerns of the potential consequences of cocaine trafficking in undermining the rule of law and corroding state institutions.

The seizure of some 12 tons of cocaine, departing or set to depart from Uruguay, between late 2019 and early 2020 in various international shipments reflects not only points to the use of the Southern cone country as a transit point along the cocaine supply chain, but to the increased flows of cocaine from South America to the EU. Although Uruguay has long been a transit point for cocaine produced in South America and bound for Western consumer markets, according to El País the volume of cocaine being trafficked is unprecedented and reflects changes in the global criminal landscape engendered by the increase in cocaine production and demand over the past decade. As stated by El País, nine out of ten goods traded pass through a container and several ports until they reach their destination. With less than 2% ever inspected, the global maritime trade alone offers myriad opportunities for organized crime groups to move drugs transcontinentally.

Moreover, cocaine trafficking in the south of Latin America mirrors much of the region's agro-business, sharing stockpiles, routes, workers, banks, law firms and means of transportation along the supply chain. It is why cocaine is often seized in cargos of soya, rice, meat, wool, wine, or fruit. (Continue reading on next page)

Organized crime groups tend to complement cocaine smuggling via this legal trade by diversifying trafficking routes with the use of clandestine fluvial, air and land routes. To some extent, this diversification of routes echoes the fragmentation of actors involved along the cocaine supply chain. During the 1980s, the cocaine market was overseen by monopolistic cartels in the style of Pablo Escobar, which organized the entire operation from planting to distribution. After these cartels were dismantled in the 1990s, these were replaced by compartmentalized, autonomous actors, often specialized in specific operations along the supply chain. Today, this supply chain is increasingly controlled by transnational organized crime groups, often of European origin, and characterized by growing "internalization", involving more players, routes, markets. This evolution of the cocaine market has led to a closer relationship between the legal economy and cocaine trafficking.

At the same time, improved technical assistance and the modernization of production processes through agricultural techniques such as pruning, fertilization, weed and pest control, as well as the introduction of coca plant varieties with higher productivity have allowed farmers to yield higher returns on their crops. Such enhanced manufacturing and distribution techniques have enabled organized crime groups to supply the growing consumer market in Western Europe with cocaine with unprecedented levels of purity.

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Drug trafficking modi operandi evolve along US-Mexican border as organized crime groups adapt to pandemic-related restrictions

29 December 2020 – The NY Times

With most illegal drugs arriving into the US via legal ports of entry, such as vehicles or travelers arriving on foot, often posing as tourists or day shoppers, the decline in the legal trade has caused important disruptions to the drug supply chain. In fact, according to a Mexican Navy Official interviewed by the New York Times (NYT), the frequency of cocaine shipments arriving in Mexico from South American countries dropped from a few times per week to once every two weeks in the midst of the pandemic.

As a result, organized crime groups have developed and invested in diverse modi operandi to smuggle drugs across the US-Mexican border. Specifically, coverage by NYT suggests organized crime groups are increasingly relying on clandestine transportation modalities and routes, as well as increasingly using cryptocurrencies, drones and internal couriers to carry out their illicit activities. Indeed, law enforcement officials have noticed rising traffic along sea routes from South to Central America, with organized crime groups relying on vessels such as semi-submersibles or go-fast boats. Similarly, a reported rise in the use of clandestine tools, such as drones or underground tunnels, has been reported to smuggle illicit drugs along the US-Mexican border.

Moreover, whereas drugs couriers were once often foreign citizens, the prohibition of "non-essential travel" has led to a notable increase in the number of US citizens or Green Card holders being used as mules, often swallowing capsules to hide drugs. Specifically, US law enforcement officials have recorded intensified efforts by organized crime groups to recruit American citizens suffering from poverty and / or drug addiction.

Finally, in Mexico, as in many countries across the world, COVID-19 has incentivized organized crime groups to turn to cryptocurrency and the dark web to facilitate drug transactions and launder their proceeds of crime.

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